

Session 10

Mercy

The gospel continues to be offered to all people, Jews and Gentiles.

Romans 11:17-32



When was the last time you felt like you were on the outside looking in? What emotions does that stir up in your heart and mind?

Think back to when you were a kid. When the time came to choose players for kickball, how quickly were you picked? Were you one of the first or were you one of the last to be picked? All of us want to be included. The good news is God includes all who come to Him in faith. Paul reminded his readers that salvation through faith in Jesus is available to everyone.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

It was Paul's habit on his missionary journeys to share the gospel with the Jews first. Then, after they had an opportunity to respond, he would move to the Gentiles. That's the same heart he revealed in this section of Romans.

In chapters 9–10, Paul emphasized salvation through faith. The Jews who refused to accept Christ believed that keeping rules and regulations was the way of salvation. But Paul demonstrated that salvation is the result of confessing Christ as Savior and believing that His sacrifice was all one needed to be made right with God (Rom. 10:9-10).

Paul also emphasized the universal nature of God's offer of salvation. He pointed out that God would accept anyone who called out to Him (10:13). That was good news for the Gentiles, but it stirred up more controversy with Jews who viewed themselves as God's chosen people.

Despite their stubbornness, Paul knew that God had not given up on the Jews. He said that a remnant of faithful Israelites would embrace grace (11:5-6). What's more, their initial rejection of the gospel opened the door for the Gentiles. In time, God's work among the Gentiles would convince Israel to come back to God on His terms, not their own (11:11-16). Ultimately, Paul foresaw a new "tree" rising up with both natural (Jewish) and wild (Gentile) branches.

Paul would turn to practical matters in chapter 12. In the final section of his letter, he challenged the Romans to live out the principles he had outlined earlier. He called them to surrender their lives to Christ and to show the world what it truly means to be a follower of Christ.

ROMANS 11:17-32

17 Now if some of the branches were broken off, and you, though a wild olive branch, were grafted in among them and have come to share in the rich root of the **cultivated olive tree** **A**, **18** do not boast that you are better than those branches. But if you do boast — you do not sustain the root, but the root sustains you. **19** Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” **20** True enough; they were broken off because of unbelief, but you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but **beware** **B**, **21** because if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. **22** Therefore, consider God’s kindness and severity: severity toward those who have fallen but God’s kindness toward you — **if you remain in his kindness** **C**. Otherwise you too will be cut off. **23** And even they, if they do not remain in unbelief, will be grafted in, because God has the power to graft them in again. **24** For if you were cut off from your native wild olive tree and against nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these — the natural branches — be grafted into their own olive tree? **25** I don’t want you to be ignorant of this **mystery** **D**, brothers and sisters, so that you will not be conceited: A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. **26** And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, The Deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. **27** And this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins. **28** Regarding the gospel, they are enemies for your advantage, but regarding **election** **E**, they are loved because of the **patriarchs** **F**, **29** since God’s gracious gifts and calling are irrevocable. **30** As you once disobeyed God but now have received mercy through their disobedience, **31** so they too have now disobeyed, resulting in mercy to you, so that they also may now receive mercy. **32** For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may have mercy on all.

Passage Outline

Be Humble (Rom. 11:17-21)

Be Thankful (Rom. 11:22-24)

Be Aware (Rom. 11:25-32)

Keywords

- A. Paul used the symbol of an olive tree to refer to Israel as others did (Jer. 11:16-17; Hos. 14:4-6).
- B. Paul warned Gentiles against being arrogant about the salvation they have in Christ. We have no grounds to boast about the mercy we’ve received.
- C. If we “continue to trust in [Jesus’] kindness” (NLT), then we’ll keep obeying Him. Faith and obedience aren’t meant to be separated.
- D. The “secret truth” (GNT) of how God is working to reach Jews and Gentiles is an important issue that all believers in Christ need to understand.
- E. The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message says election is “the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners.”
- F. The forefathers of Israel are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Paul had been teaching the Gentiles about the difficulty many Jews were having accepting Jesus as the Messiah. They were entrenched in the law and struggled to see Him for who He really was. To illustrate his point, Paul used the image of an *olive tree*.

What makes religious pride so crippling and dangerous?

BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about a practice. – Look up “graft” in a Bible dictionary. In what ways does Paul’s use of the illustration of grafting differ from the ancient practice of grafting? In what ways is Paul’s description similar? What points do you think Paul was making with this illustration?

To help the Romans avoid the trap of pride, Paul challenged them to examine God’s perfect balance between *kindness and severity*. God is not so kind that He overlooks evil, and not so harsh that He condemns without cause. He loves all, but those who reject His offer of salvation will face the consequences of their decision. At the same time, God can be immeasurably kind. The Romans had experienced that firsthand when He welcomed them into His family. Faith was all they had—and all He required.

How would you describe the balance between God’s severity and His kindness?

KEY DOCTRINE: God’s Purpose of Grace – Election is the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility (Phil. 2:5-7).

Paul saw God’s work among the Jews as a *mystery*—a previously unknown truth that needed to be revealed. Since the Romans were *brothers and sisters*, he didn’t want them to be *ignorant* of God’s plan. By resolving their ignorance, Paul would also protect them from conceit.

How does a person’s relationship with Jesus affect the way they view others? How could nurturing a heart of gratitude to God change how a person views others?

Paul noted that God saw Israel from a “now, but not yet” perspective. On one hand, they were currently *enemies* of the gospel. But God still held a special place for the Jews in His heart. Through His *election*—His choice to make them His people—they were blessed. Because the *patriarchs* accepted His promises in faith, the nation was still beloved by God. God had a history with the Jews, and He would not reject them.

What does God’s plans being irrevocable tell us about His character?

Like the Jews, the Romans had *disobeyed God*. But they had accepted the gospel in faith. When that happened, God had accepted them into His family.

APPLY THE TEXT

- Because salvation comes through faith in Jesus alone, there is no room for arrogance expressed toward unbelievers.
- All believers need to be aware that God’s mercy demonstrated in Christ remains open to the Jews.
- God is merciful to everyone, giving salvation to all who place their faith in His Son.

Who around you has rejected Christ? What is your attitude toward them? How can you and your Bible study group continue to minister to them in a loving and respectful way?

How would you rate your awareness that God’s offer of salvation is made to all people? To what evidence can you point to justify your answer? What adjustments do you need to make?

Prayer Requests



DAILY EXPLORATION

Day 1: Salvation comes through Jesus alone.

Read Romans 11:17-21, considering the example Paul is using.

To illustrate his point, Paul used the image of an olive tree. Normally, a farmer would graft cultivated branches into a wild tree. But Paul reversed the order to describe what had happened in the church. In this tree, some of the branches had *broken off*, but God did not destroy the whole tree. Instead, He grafted wild branches into the trunk. Here, the broken branches represented the Jews who had rejected Christ. The *wild* branches represented the Gentiles. Even though they were not part of the tree originally, they still grew into healthy branches. Paul feared that this grafting process could leave the Gentiles with a superiority complex. After all, the Jews had rejected God's plan for salvation, while Gentiles had embraced Christ. Some could have thought God now loved the Gentiles more than the Jews. Paul was clear that God was not finished with the Jews yet. Paul warned them not to *boast*, because their salvation fully depended on God's kindness and grace. So to believing Gentiles Paul wrote, *Do not be arrogant, but beware*. Because salvation comes through faith in Jesus alone, there is no room for arrogance expressed toward unbelievers.

How have you seen religious pride become crippling and dangerous?

Day 2: God will restore anyone who comes to Him in faith.

Read Romans 11:22-24, comparing God's kindness and severity.

Despite their stubbornness and rebellion, Paul reminded his Gentile readers that the unbelieving Jews were not hopeless. God will restore anyone who comes to Him in faith (Rom. 10:17). This was true for the Gentiles who had accepted Christ, and it was true for Jews who repented of their unbelief and turned back to God. They would be grafted in as quickly and as easily as any Gentile. For Paul, this wasn't just theoretical; it was his testimony. He had rejected Christ and persecuted His followers. He had dedicated his life to protecting the law and eliminating those he considered heretics. But God had been gracious to him. When Paul came to Christ in faith, he was grafted back into the tree. This was personal to him. God's plan has always been based on faith. Since He has all authority, He can graft anyone who believes. He had done it for the Gentiles, and He would do it for the Jews. The only obstacle that kept Israelites from being grafted was their own lack of faith. While the Gentiles were like adopted children, the Jews would be like prodigals who found their way home.

How would you describe the balance between God's severity and His kindness?

Day 3: **Citizenship in heaven is based on faith.**

Read Romans 11:25-27, identifying the mystery that is mentioned.

In His sovereignty, God had allowed Israel to harden its heart against Him. This opened the door for the Gentiles to accept the gospel. But this was only a partial hardening—meaning some Jews (like Paul) would acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. Eventually, the *hardening* would disappear and Israel would have a chance to respond—just like the Gentiles had. God had blessed Israel so that the entire world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). For Jews and Gentiles alike, citizenship in heaven is based on faith—nothing more, nothing less.

Again, the hardening was temporary. At some point, a faithful remnant of Jews will open their hearts to Jesus and be grafted into the family. So, God is still at work among the Jews and will be until His plan is complete.

To illustrate his point, Paul quoted two Old Testament prophecies. Hundreds of years before Jesus came, Isaiah had predicted that a *Deliverer* (the Messiah) would come and *turn godlessness away from the Jews* (Isa. 59:20). When they returned to God, the prophet Jeremiah said He would be faithful to *take away their sins* (Jer. 31:31-34). He had made a *covenant with them* and would honor it when the time was right.

How does your relationship with Jesus affect the way you view others? How could nurturing a heart of gratitude to God change how you view others?

Day 4: **God's promises are irrevocable.**

Read Romans 11:28-29, highlighting the word irrevocable.

God loves the whole world (John 3:16) and gives everyone a chance to be saved. Paul knew that the Jews' rebellion had raised questions. Some might have wondered if they had crossed a point of no return. Paul's answer was the same as God's answer: Not at all! That's because salvation is not based on demographics like culture or ethnicity. Instead, redemption is rooted in His *gracious gifts and calling*. He has promised salvation as a free gift to anyone who will receive it, and He will keep that promise as He keeps all His promises.

Paul said these promises *are irrevocable*. They cannot change or be altered—even by a nation steeped in rebellion. When God's grace is combined with faith, it always produces eternal results. That will never change for Jews or Gentiles.

What does God's plans being irrevocable tell you about His character?

Day 5: God shows mercy.

Read Romans 11:30-32, noting God's mercy.

The Jews would enjoy the same patience from God that the Romans received. Despite their disobedience—which had benefited the Gentiles—the Jews could still return to God. If they would humble themselves and respond to God's offer of salvation in faith, they would also *receive mercy*.

When everything is said and done, we all need to be grafted into God's tree. None of us are good enough to earn our salvation. We all approach Him in faith, trusting Him for salvation. Paul used the image of a prison to explain our need and God's provision. Because of sin, we are in prison. When we repent of our disobedience in faith, everything changes. God sets us free and shows us *mercy* we never deserved. God demonstrates this kindness and grace to all. Not everyone will be redeemed because many will continue to reject Christ. But everyone has the opportunity.

How does God show mercy to both the Jews and the Gentiles?



TALK IT OUT

Reflect on the truths found in Romans 11, sharing with other members of your Bible study group.

In what ways could we ever be guilty of displaying an us versus them attitude toward unbelievers?

What's the danger in giving more attention to God's kindness? To His severity? Where's the balance?

How has God "imprisoned all in disobedience"?



For additional context, read "Elijah, A Man of God," available digitally in the Spring 2020 issue of *Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible* at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.